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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature reveals that increased syntactic maturity is developmental growth properly associated with elementary and junior high school students and that measuring this maturity will not prove that an individual writer is skilled or unskilled. Improved style, unlike increased syntactic maturity, is not quantifiable growth, though the growth and the improvement may occur together. Style is the ability of the skilled writer to control expression consciously. Examples of student writing are included. (AEA)

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The Elusive Nature of the Relationship between Syntactic Maturity and Writing Quality*

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Some years ago I gave a graduate class an assignment to compare the styles of several authors, among them Robbe-Grillet (in translation). The students were to use the linguistic and stylistic techniques we had been studying--transformational theory, Hunt's developmental studies, Christensen's generative rhetoric, and Ohmann's linguistic approaches to literary style. One young lady, seeing that Robbe-Grillet's T-units were far longer than those of the other writers, concluded that the French author wrote the most syntactically mature prose of the group. I reminded her, of course, that when you are analyzing the prose of skilled writers, as opposed to junior high or senior high school students, you are talking about style, not syntactic maturity. Therefore, if Robbe-Grillet wrote long T-units, it was because he did so for some esthetic purpose, not because his prose was necessarily more mature than say Phillip Roth's.

Like that young lady, many of us investigating the effects of sentence combining pedagogies misused the term syntactic maturity. At various times we equated syntactic maturity to complexity, to style, and to the sophistication of the skilled writer. But mostly--because we confused bigger with better--we equated syntactic maturity with writing quality. This misuse of the term created confusion about both the aims and the results of sentence combining studies, particularly those conducted at the college level.

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It was easy to make the error. Hunt had shown that the syntactic differences between high school seniors and professional writers were most obvious in clause lengths, just as the syntactic differences between fourth grade and twelfth grade writers were most obvious in T-unit lengths. Once that fact was established, college level sentence-combining researchers could state a clear, objectively measured aim--to get their students to bridge the gap in clause length, to make the writing of college freshmen more "syntactically mature." To substantiate our claims, we often quoted Hunt's comment that "if twelfth graders of average IQ were to learn to write like these superior adults, they would apparently need to learn to lengthen their clauses" (1965: 57).

If we had paid attention to some of Hunt's other comments as much as we paid attention to that one, we might have been more careful about relating bigger to better. For one thing, Hunt delimited the term syntactic maturity so that it would "designate nothing more than 'the observed characteristics of writers in an older grade.' It has nothing to do with whether students write 'better' in any general stylistic sense" (1965: 5). For another, Hunt did not claim that the "superior" writers published in Harpers and the Atlantic were the next stage in a continuum that moved ineluctably from twelfth grade to professional writing. In fact, Hunt specifically warned that the "magazine article writers are not . . . mere average school children grown older. Any of several variables may contribute to the differences in their writings. Two of these differences will be kept in mind of we speak of them as 'superior adults.' Their writing is unquestionably superior" (1965: 55). Hunt further noted that these "superior adults could use seemingly immature devices such as coordination in skilled ways. So he warned against the overreliance on counting, saying

that "Merely quantifying methods such as those used in this study cannot separate the skillful from the skillesss occurrences" (1965: 41).

Following Hunt, John Mellon, who conducted the first sentence combining research, was quite clear about his goals, which did not relate to the enhancement of his student's writing quality but to increasing their syntactic fluency, a term Mellon substituted for syntactic maturity. He claimed that "enhanced growth of syntactic fluency . . . merely means that children of a certain age, after a given period of sentence-combining practice, would produce writing whose structural parameters had theretofore been associated with the normal productions of children some years older" (1969: 25). So Mellon was rightfully upset when Francis Christensen claimed that grammatically-related but a-rhetorical sentence-combining exercises did not produce better student writing. Mellon answered that "Christensen explicitly substitutes the term 'mature style' for the expression 'mature syntactic fluency,' despite my repeated warning to the contrary" (1969: 79). Like Hunt, Mellon clearly differentiated fluency (maturity) from style. To him, style is "what we really mean when we speak of teaching 'writing.'" And he stated that the teaching of writing should be left to at least senior high school "because it assumes of students the cognitive maturity entailed in their being able to think consciously about the 'how' of expression while maintaining at the same time an appropriate concern for the 'what'" (1969: 82).

Mellon showed that students practicing sentence combining could increase their syntactic fluency and that this would not make them worse writers. That is, they would not, by increasing their syntactic fluency, complicate their prose so as to render it ineffective. This was both interesting and important,

but it did not offer the composition teacher hope for the immediate improvement of writing pedagogy.

Frank O'Hare offerred them that hope when he showed that seventh grade students practicing sentence-building exercises would improve their writing quality as well as increase their syntactic maturity. He asked the "rather interesting question as to when an enhanced syntactic maturity would become discernible to the general reader . . . [for] If sentence-combining practice is designed to make students write sentences that are more mature syntactically, it seems reasonable to assume that at some point this syntactic difference would show qualitatively" (1973: 14). To make that connection between syntactic maturity and writing quality, O'Hare had to equate syntactic maturity with style. He concluded that his findings "strongly suggest that style, rather narrowly defined as the final syntactic choices habitually made from the writer's practical repertoire of syntactic alternatives is an important dimension of what constitutes writing ability" (1973: 74).

But, looking back over his work and O'Hare's from the standpoint of several years, Mellon denies that the intent of these early studies was to teach style. In fact, he says that "the function of sentence-combining as initially conceived (Mellon, 1969) was solely, through calesthenic practice, to increase the semantic 'carrying capacity' of young writers' sentences, somewhat analogously to the way high school jumpers' deep knee bends and stationary high kicks increase the heights they attain in actual jumping. Thus the sentence-combining problems had to be as structurally complex as it was possible to make them without rendering them incapable of solution. But style was not taught, one way or another" (1978: 20).

Moreover, questioning whether the gains O'Hare reports are real gains in writing quality, Mellon reaffirms his feeling that it is not appropriate to relate qualitative to quantitative gains--at least not until the final two years of high school. He says that "in research conducted in grade ten and below, over periods of one school year or less, we should not expect enhanced syntactic fluency gains to be reflected in overall-quality judgments unless (a) the 'gains' are characterized by optional surface structure combinings, and must therefore be considered special performances rather than growth, or (b) some other biasing factor has affected the quality scores, such as the experimentor's expectations or the teaching of a very good writing instructor" (1978: 23-3).

In brief, Mellon feels that practicing signalled sentence exercises devoid of rhetorical context is useful for enhancing the syntactic maturity of junior high school students. Such practice, though, does not teach style, and therefore it should not be expected to enhance the students' writing quality.

What about the relationship between syntactic measures and quality on the college level? The Miami study reports that freshmen who practiced whole-discourse sentence combining problems for a semester had significantly higher posttest scores than freshmen who took the traditional course (Morenberg et al 1978). The sentence combining group's quantitative scores were significantly larger. More importantly, their papers were judged to be significantly better on three measures of writing quality--a holistic rating, an analytic rating, and a forced choice rating.

In order to determine the relationship between the holistic rating and the analytic and syntactic factors, we constructed various models for a multiple

correlation coefficient analysis on the pooled data, with holistic rating as the dependent variable. The syntactic factors proved poor predictors. A model using all three syntactic factors (w/c, c/t-u, w/t-u) was able to predict less than 3% of the variance of the pretest holistic score. Such models were able to predict less than 4% of the variance of the experimental group's posttest holistic score, and about 7½% of the control group's. In contrast, three-variable models using analytic data could predict over 50% of the two groups' scores on the holistic rating.

Les Faigley, who conducted an experiment using generative rhetoric to teach freshman composition obtained much the same results when he performed a multiple-regression analysis on his data. Pooled, his five syntactic variables (w/c, w/t-u, c/t-u, percent of words in final free modifiers, percent of t-u's in final free modifiers) predicted 20% of the variance of the holistic rating. But the parameters of syntactic maturity (w/c, w/t-u, c/t-u) without the other two measures predicted less than 2% of the holistic rating variance (1978: 4). Faigley concludes that "we may never achieve a quantitative description of mature writing broadly applicable to student and skilled adult prose written for different purposes and audiences. . ." (1978: 8).

Probably we will not. The reason is that skilled adult writers are not merely grown up student writers who write larger clauses and T-units, or who simply use more final free modifiers, or even more nominative absolutes. Measures of syntactic maturity may be useful to differentiate large groups of student writers at various levels of development. But they cannot tell us whether an individual writer is skilled or unskilled, unless, like that graduate student I mentioned earlier, we are willing to believe that a skilled writer

who prefers long clauses and T-units is more mature--syntactically at least--than one who prefers short syntactic structures.

So we are really dealing with two separate concepts--syntactic maturity and style. Syntactic maturity, as measured by words-per-clause, words-per-T-unit, and clauses-per-T-unit, is a useful concept for measuring growth in student writing. Mellon defines such growth as increases in restrictive embeddings. This is cognitive development manifested in writing by the expansion of unique dominant nominals. Mellon differentiates this from the surface structure maneuver skilled writers use to add secondary statements to their writing, the non-restrictive expansion associated with the Piagetian concept of decentering.

Increased syntactic maturity, then, is developmental growth, growth properly associated with elementary and junior high school students. It can be enhanced by practice with the kind of signalled sentence-combining exercises developed by Mellon. But we should not expect students who register increases in syntactic maturity figures necessarily to be better writers in any kind of qualitative sense, especially not college level students.

At the college level, the measures we associate with syntactic maturity can be boosted in various ways, including the students' knowledge their teacher wants longer sentences. I suspect that is what happened in Stewart's study, when the experimental group registered a 2.75 word-per-clause gain without a concomitant gain in quality. I doubt that his sentence-combining students became, as he claims, "syntactically more mature than at pretest time" (1978: 266).

Improved style, unlike increased syntactic maturity, is not quantifiable growth, though both the growth and the improvement may occur together. Style is the ability of the skilled writer to control expression consciously. It can

be improved by practice with the kind of unsignalled, whole-discourse problems developed by Strong, problems that have no "correct" answers but that require the writer to become self-conscious about language, to take pleasure in words and syntax.

Here, for example, is a 73-word stretch of discourse from a pretest paper with a 10.69 average word-per-clause length. The paper received a 2.25 holistic score on a 6-point scale:

> In pondering such a subject one in attempting to find and answer to a "why" or "how" can best reach a conclusion by examining in this case "why" a person escapes from reality in the first place, having done so looking at how they escape and at the same time putting it all together and examining the consequences and affects that this dreaming has.

It is one T-unit long, five awkward, lifeless, but "syntactically mature" clauses averaging 14.6 words each.

Here, on the other hand, is a 78-word stretch of discourse from the same student's posttest paper. It has a 9.01 average word-per-clause length, down 1.68 from the pretest. But the paper received a 5.75 holistic score:

> Imagine my anxiety when one very "cool," "hip," "with-it" type said, "Say blood, do you blow?" I stood there, ignorance all over my face, not knowing that he wanted to know whether or not I could sing: Adaptation came with time, and soon my speech became as slurred as theirs. They bestowed upon me the title of "blood" which is as tight as one can get with a cool black man. Dig it, I had been accepted.

This contains seven T-units and ten vivid clauses, surging with life, though--alas--"syntactically immature" at 7.8 words each.

In brief, as Mellon reminds us, syntactic maturity is "really only a statistical artifact, numbers that result when we count constructions" (1978: 35). But writing quality is more than a statistical artifact. It is self-conscious

artifice. Moreover, as Richard Lanham says, "Such self-consciousness is the only stylistic attitude likely to last beyond the classroom . . . . and the only possible basis for such teaching is an acute awareness of stylistic surface. Everything in a [freshman] composition course should be directed toward such an aim" (1974: 18-19).

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